DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 154 631 FL 009 478

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TITLE Let's Get in the Swim of Things.
INSTITUTION Virginia Modern Foreign Language Association.
PUB DATE Feb 78
NOTE 7p.
JOURNAL CIT Bulletin of the Foreign Language Association of Virginia; v33 n2 p87-92 Feb 1978

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Affective Objectives; Audiovisual Aids; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Conversational Language Courses; *Course Objectives; Cross Cultural Training; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Education; Higher Education; *Instructional Materials; Instructional Media; *Language Instruction; Language Proficiency; Language Programs; Language Role; Language Skills; Language Teachers; Language Usage; Learning Activities; Learning Motivation; Secondary Education; *Second Language Learning; Speech Communication; Student Attitudes; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Learning to swim and learning a foreign language are analagous activities, in that both are skills learned for different reasons. Few foreign language students will attain "near-native fluency;" nor will many of them become interpreters or teachers. Foreign language teachers must therefore revise priorities, restructure courses, adjust methods, and establish realistic goals. There are indirect routes to the goal of appreciating a foreign culture. One might take the students on an imaginary year-long "trip" in the foreign country and in areas of the world where the language is spoken. By organizing all learning activities around this theme, students participate in and contribute to the total learning experience. The vocabulary, grammar and structures they use will be examples of real language. Textbooks become guide books, and only truly useful portions of them are used. Games, conversation activities, visits with native speakers, well-chosen readings -- all of these activities contribute to the student's progress in integrating the four skills. They also take account of affective behavioral objectives and will lead to improved attitudes. A Presidential Commission on Foreign Language and Area Studies is projected; its area of concern reinforce the position taken in this article. (AMH)

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LET'S GET IN THE SWIM OF THINGS

In a recent article I read, I ran across a quotation that began to gnaw at me: "There are millions of people learning languages not studying them, and millions of people studying languages not learning them."[1] In our case, as language teachers, we might interpret "people" as "students." Even more importantly, we might--no, not might--ought to ask ourselves into which category our students fall: are they learning a language or simply studying it?

I am compelled to say, unfortunately, that the great majority of our students are nothing more than warm bodies occupying seats in our classrooms, vainly struggling to keep their heads above water, frantically treading water while trying to give the appearance of swimming, solely to satisfy the coach--you, the teacher.

We "coaches" are expecting our students to swim in the Olympics before they can comfortably stay afloat by relaxing in an environment which is foreign to them. Learning a foreign language is a skill just as is swimming, and a skill is not instantly acquired but is developed over a prolonged period of learning, understanding and continued practice. We must proceed by minimal steps in order to develop a learning situation and not overwhelm our future Olympians with a wealth of technical data before they even know what they are there for.

A potential swimmer is not going to learn to swim because you want him to; he has to be convinced of the value of needing to learn to swim. If he can understand the value of swimming--be it to become an Olympian, solely for pleasure or as a useful lifesaving skill--he will be a more receptive subject. He might not be an eager student; he might even be rebellious at the outset. Yet we coaches must realize that all swimmers do not want to be Olympians. Some of us are told we must learn to swim, some of us want to learn to swim, and some of us have a natural talent for it.

Swimming has its rewards. It also involves a lot of drudgery, repetition and practice. We often reach plateaux where we seem not to progress, but with persistence we continue to sharpen and develop our skills.

Swimming involves our whole body. Language is not words alone, but gestures, tone of voice, intonation, emotions and a limitless catalogue of unidentifiables which make a language unique. The main difference between swimming and foreign language learning is that swimming is a solitary activity while language is communication. Swimming can be competitive, but so can language. A debate, discussion or haggling in the marketplace is verbal competition. Swimming can save your life. Language can find you food, help, a place to stay. Swimming can be fun. Language can help you make new friends, go on dates, understand a book, a movie, a TV program. You might not swim for pleasure all year round, but if you find yourself accidentally in a situation where you need the skill, it is there. We constantly tell our students "You'll never know when you'll need your foreign language"--which is quite true--but we frequently use this as a reason for learning another language. More than likely, it is a convenient excuse since we have never really sat down and thought of the justification for studying a foreign language. The communicative skill will be there if we accidentally find ourselves in a situation where we might need it.

Many people think that the only benefit to be gained from swimming is that of getting a job as a lifeguard. Many think that the only career in which a foreign language can be of benefit is teaching. Not all swimmers are lifeguards, and not all former foreign language students are teachers.

Let us now put our lockerroom pep talk in perspective. We, as foreign language teachers, need to examine ourselves--our objectives, our expectations and our philosophies. Our task is not to turn out a glut of teachers and interpreters. Nor is our task to convert all students into bilinguals or even people with what we cryptically call "near-native fluency."

It is often quite unnerving to face reality, but we are all aware of the plight of foreign language study in the United States. High school enrollments are dropping, courses of study are being phased out of the schools, colleges are dropping foreign language entrance and/or graduation requirements, faculty members are finding

1. David Sariego, letter published in THE FRENCH REVIEW, LI, 1, October 1977, p. 77.

themselves out of a job. Reality tells us that foreign language study is the only purely elective course in a high school curriculum. Just how, then, do we get students to enroll in our classes?

There is only one answer--ADVERTISE. I am not talking only about recruiting campaigns to swell the ranks of our army of foreign language students by attracting them with catchy phrases and cute posters and bumper stickers. We can start with ourselves. We know that students will study what is interesting and what is relevant. "Relevance" is a currently overused and overrated term, but relevance is precisely what we need. We have so much to offer our students and have taken so little advantage of it. We rely on old dicta to convince our students of the value of foreign language study--"You'll never know when you'll need it", or "Suppose one of your main sources for your research paper were in French...!" Let us not underestimate our value. As Gilbert Jarvis states in the title of an article in ACCENT ON ACTFL (May, 1975), "We think we are EVENING IN PARIS, but we're really CHANEL."

On the other hand, let us not continue to live in our highly unrealistic utopian dreamworld of objectives of "near-native" proficiency and expectations of an entire class of enthusiastic (bordering on zealous) fluent speakers of any language.

We cannot make CHANEL out of EVENING IN PARIS; nor can we continue to try to disguise EVENING IN PARIS as CHANEL. They are two entirely different entities.

Priorities must be established. Do we want our students to write impeccably, to read great masterpieces of foreign literature "in the original", to be able to listen to a conversation, a broadcast or a movie and understand all, or to speak acceptably and understandably, to read a guidebook and signs and newspapers? Ideally, a four-skills approach would be lovely, but how many students can excel in all four skill areas plus meet the ill-defined, nation-wide objectives of "appreciating a foreign culture"?

> Communication--in the fullest sense of the term--is one of the most important goals of foreign language learning. Yet in too many foreign language classes communication has been neglected. One observes listening, speaking, reading, and writing behavior--all with little communication. One of the principle reasons for this lack of communication has been the nature of textbook materials--all too often page after page of grammatical exercises or pattern drills.[2]

Looking objectively at today's students, we need to revamp our thinking. We might even echo the chronic student complaint--"But...I'm never going to have to write Spanish!" This, indeed, may be true. If most students have their way, neither will they speak, willfully listen to or read it, simply because we have "turned them off."

All right, coaches, what is our strategy?

The time is ripe to turn our students on to foreign language learning. But WE must make the first step. For too long a time student complaints and suggestions have fallen on deaf ears. We assure them that we know what will be beneficial for them. But do we? We know what was good for us, but we are teachers. Most of our students will not be foreign language teachers. Nor will many of them be foreign language majors. So, let us stop training our neophyte charges as if all were going to be future Olympic gold medal winners. To quote Sandra Savignon,

> ...Throughout my own professional preparation, I was always concerned with accuracy and propriety. And I hope to instill the same respect for the French language in my students.[3]

Quite obviously (and hopefully), I am not advocating a total restructuring of our courses to suit student whims and fancies, or even what they consider "relevant". We, of course, are the teachers. We were hired for our expertise, and we, in fact, do know what will be beneficial for our students.

The objective I mentioned earlier--"appreciating a foreign culture"--is precisely what we want to teach our students. Near-native fluency is exactly what we would like to attain. But how realistic are these goals when we have our students in class for only one or two years? Just what do we mean by "near-native fluency"? How can you measure the degree of appreciation your students have gained?

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2. Gilbert Jarvis et al., CONNAITRE ET SE CONNAITRE, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976, p. vii.
3. Sandra Savignon, "Teaching for Communication", AATF NATIONAL BULLETIN, Vol. 2, no. 2, November 1976, p. 2.

Let us at least listen to our students. If we ask them what they would hope or like to learn in our classes, the hue and cry is conversation, and not "How to appreciate a foreign country, its people and its great artistic works." Nor do they clamor for "near-native fluency."

> Students learning to read French want to receive messages or information that matters to them. Students learning to speak or write French want to send messages that matter to them.[4]

They are more than willing to inform us that they do not want to learn grammar, which is fondly referred to as "junk", "stuff", and other denigrating terms. Have you not noticed the barrier of bored, unreceptive minds whose eyes begin to glaze over when the ominous word "grammar" is mentioned? Yet, you simply cannot converse and communicate without grammar.

We may fervently cling to our goals but we simply must realize that there are methods which, while aimed directly at these goals, will never lead our students that far, because we just forget to "stop and smell the roses" along the way. There are other routes which are not as direct but which will expose the students to many more appealing aspects of the trip. In the long run, the students themselves will be able to say convincingly that they have learned exactly what we have wanted all along.

Why go directly to Paris and hide our students in the Bibliothèque Nationale? Let us go to the provinces, meet the people, find our way around (even haltingly so), read the newspapers and guidebooks, visit Paris for a week or so. Near the end of the trip we can go back to Paris with a greater degree of knowledge and sophistication and not be typical tourists.

We have the opportunity to teach cultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding at every stage in our classrooms. By taking your students on an imaginary year-long trip to France, you offer a central direction for all activities from grammar to vocabulary. Students can go through customs, ride a taxi, the métro, a bus and a train. They can visit all of the typical tourist attractions. They can check into a hotel, buy a meal, go to the theater. They can celebrate holidays and birthdays. They can visit in a French home, meet the family, and go on a picnic. The students become involved; they participate in and contribute to the total learning experience. The vocabulary they learn will be practical. The grammar and structures they use will be examples of real language.

But let us not be too restricted in our cultural study. We are guilty of leading students to believe that French is spoken only in France, Spanish only in Mexico and Spain. Students can prepare projects on other areas of the world where the target language is spoken, and they will become aware of the cosmopolitanism of their language. You might prepare mini-units on several other French- or Spanish-speaking countries yourself. Did you know, for instance, that the United States is the fourth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world?

Our textbooks should be our guidebooks, but only we know what we want to see and do. So choose a good guidebook, and use those portions which you need.

For so long we have held to the faulty belief that the textbook is holy writ. According to the "gospel according to Harcourt Brace Jovanovich", we have felt that we had to finish our level one text in level one. In our normal classroom situation, when a majority of students have "mastered" a certain grammar point, we move on, dragging the slower-learning student into a new quagmire of grammar before he has successfully extricated himself from the preceding one. Even more serious is the fact that we must move on because our lesson plan says we are supposed to move on. A lesson plan, although necessary, is not a papal (or in this case, a professorial) bull. It, like the textbook, is a guide. Textbooks or long-range lesson plans cannot and must not establish our classroom speed--or approach--of presentation of subject matter. We must feel our students out--their capacity for learning, their prior language experience, their interests, their desires.

We are simply trying to do too much within the frame of a given constant over which we have no control--time. Let us stop kidding ourselves! Of course we cannot teach the past or imperfect subjunctive by the end of the second year; and if we do, we are doing nothing more than "doing" the grammar, but we have neglected something else. A class that is totally grammar-oriented is quite deadly. We produce students who think that French is nothing but verbs and exceptions to rules. Just as "a spoonful of sugar makes the medicine go down", enjoyable activities make grammar much more palatable. Playing "Jeopardy", while overtly fun, tests not only the formation of interrogative structures, but includes listening comprehension, vocabulary and general cultural information. Students who play musical instruments--especially guitars--can help immensely in teaching both folk- and popular songs, which themselves can illustrate specific grammar points if they

4. Jarvis, p. viii.

are well-chosen.

Instead of accepting a textbook as sacrosanct, we should be more selective in the choice of texts and more daring in adapting a given text to fit our own particular situation. (As a rule of thumb, it is highly practical to expect to use two books over a period of three years.)

Given the text--or more basically--in spite of the text, our first priority should be to ask ourselves: "What am I trying to do, and what do I want to do?" This basic objective supersedes all others in ordering our courses. If we want our students to speak the language, speak it, do not talk about it.

> As most experienced teachers will acknowledge, it is one thing to know about a language --verb forms, vocabulary items, basic grammatical patterns, and the like--and quite another to know how to use it effectively in a conversational exchange with a native speaker.[5]

We as teachers must realize that after a very limited course of study, our students' conversational ability will indeed be basic and not flawless. Vocabularies will be limited. Their working knowledge of grammar will be rudimentary at best. What is more rewarding, though, than seeing a student develop the skill to communicate in another language?

Why not invite a native speaker from your area to visit your class, speak nothing but his native language and have students interview him on a variety of topics? When the student finds out that even his first- or second-year language can actually elicit reactions and responses from a native speaker, he will have reached a milestone in his language-learning experience. This is an authentic experience.

Student attitude (a long overlooked aspect of teaching) improves because the student develops confidence in his ability to communicate comfortably and comprehensibly. We must cease to be so "overly concerned with completeness or the mot juste. (...) It is what they say that counts, not how they say it."[6]

This is indeed a bitter pill for us to swallow, but I am in no way saying that we must allow faulty grammar to go unchecked. But what is more important--the message or the code? Only by establishing our priorities and objectives from the outset can we put all aspects of our classroom task in perspective. Continual correction of every uttered error does not lead to improvement, but to intimidation, embarrassment and eventual silence. We must learn to be interested bystanders and moderators in conversation sessions with our students, not leaders and correctors.

Most of our students will never go to France or to Spain or to Mexico. They may, in fact, never have to speak French or Spanish again. However, they must realize that French does exist outside the covers of their textbook and that French is not only spoken on tape. Speaking is an active, productive skill. By its very nature it must involve at least one other person. But not everyone wants to learn to speak a foreign language. Quite frequently, students who are hesitant to speak up in our language classrooms are hesitant to speak up even in English. Yet these same students may be avid readers.

For so long we have used readers as nothing more than vehicles for grammar and for simple questions such as "What happens next?" We have chosen readers containing extracts from classical works or adulterated reworkings of masterpieces of foreign language literature. Who has not felt the frustration of teaching very humerous readings which turn into sheer exercises in boredom because the students have spent their entire preparation in the glossary at the end of the book? They have not read the material.

Our first task is to teach them how to read a foreign language through recognition of word families, contextual and grammatical clues, not how to translate the book into "good English." We should be interested from the very outset with comprehension of the story and not with memorization of facts. Be selective. There is absolutely no harm in beginning to teach the reading skill with contemporary materials. As a matter of fact, students are more likely to enjoy and understand current, non-philosophical writings.

Plays offer a wealth of possibilities. They portray real conversation. They can be acted out by having students learn the various parts. With the written text out of the way, pronunciation will improve, and gestures can become an integral part of speaking. Videotaping the play--act by act or scene by scene--until the entire play is recorded offers an excellent source of material that can be shared with other teachers or even other schools. As the reading skill develops, we can move to more substantial and substantive readings. Concur-

5. Savignon, p. 1.
6. Savignon, p. 2.

rently, as the student's ability to express himself orally is developing, his ability to express his thoughts on more abstract topics should improve.

What I am saying essentially is that we must sequence all of our materials so that progress is made through minimal steps with learning at each step rather than overwhelming our students with premature quantum leaps into material which does not correlate with their degree of sophistication in second language learning.

We must also beware of bandwagons and fads. As Nelson Brooks says "Bandwagons are not for jumping on." If, in fact, we do jump on them, keep one foot on the ground. We are all guilty of finding some new technique for teaching or some new device which is touted to be the answer to all of our problems. And we fall for it 100%! We all got language laboratories and herded our students into a pristine, sterile environment which in no way simulated reality--neither what we heard, how we heard it or where we heard it. Student frustrations were channelled toward machines. The new catch-phrase then was "audio-lingual."

What about its success? Where are our NDEA-financed laboratories now? In closets. We misdirected our attention and our methods. Sure--we produced speakers: speakers who could neither read nor write.

About 20 years later (in 1977), we still advocate audio-lingual teaching--coupled with reading and writing. In other words, we now advocate a four-skills approach including our new popular area: culture.

But, realizing that we cannot put the same shoe on every foot, we began to emphasize the individual differences among students, and our next bandwagon rolled by: individualized instruction. Not all of us leapt on this bandwagon. We had neither the time nor the expertise to individualize all of our material. I might add, some of us did not have the desire to individualize our courses. The simple logistics of record-keeping, division of time and the endless creation of LAP's have brought us out of this new dreamworld.

All of these innovations are not innovations at all. We have always been aware of individual differences among students. We have always known that languages were both written and spoken, but we did nothing in our classrooms to implement what we were aware of. We were guided instead by new textbooks and new methods. To a degree, we are still being led rather than leading.

It is time to innovate. Before we begin--a word of caution. Establish your objectives. Be firmly convinced of what you want to do, what you want your students to be able to do. Your objectives must be totally within the realm of attainable possibility. Your students must know what is expected of them. The objectives you set for your students must be measurable, since evaluation is necessary. Appreciation is not measurable, but the steps leading to appreciation can be very easily measured. The end result resides solely within the mind of the student; you and only you can provide the means.

Especially do not overlook objectives for the affective behavior of your students. If you insist on telling them that learning a second language is fun, make it fun. Here again, keep things in focus. Class time is not only game time, but games can make language learning enjoyable. There is nothing wrong with "Bingo" to teach numbers or with playing "Mille bornes", but too much of any activity which is fun makes that same activity lose its perspective and become nothing more than a method to kill time.

Periodically, verify what you are teaching and not by resorting to English or by giving a test. Make the students demonstrate their degree of learning by performing some activity. Why not begin a foreign language literary magazine containing poems and stories written by your students? Why not have them write a skit and present it to the class? Or give a report? or interview a native speaker? The possibilities are limitless, and best of all, they are not formal evaluative tests, at least in the student's mind.

"All of us work best and stay longest in activities which give us a sense of accomplishment."[7] Students must feel that they can actually do something productive and meaningful in the foreign language. Attitudes will improve, and along with improved attitudes comes improved performance. Students who sense a true value from their foreign language experience are your best recruiters and advertisements for your classes.

Yet, this sense of accomplishment is of utmost importance to us teachers also. Instead of exasperating ourselves because a student's pronunciation is nowhere near native (except native American), because his grammar has only a vague resemblance to that of the target language, and because his vocabulary is remarkably American with Spanish articles and an -a or -o tacked on to the end of each word, let us reassess just what we expect from them.

7. Savignon, p. 3.

We must be willing to change. We must face the facts. Students must now perform, become active and involved. Today's students no longer blindly accept directives without justification. The era of the passive foreign language learner has taken its toll in decreased enrollments and in dropped foreign language requirements. They must be firmly convinced that what they are doing has value and we must express our convictions to them.

> The attitude of a foreign-language department toward experimentation determines to a large extent whether the implementation of a performance curriculum will result in success or failure.[8]

President Carter is firmly convinced of the value of foreign language study, since he plans to establish a Presidential Commission on Foreign Language and Area Studies. Some of the areas of concern of such a Committee will be

1. To examine the quantity and quality of foreign language education as it relates to the study of other cultures so that appropriate measures may be taken to strengthen such programs;

2. To attempt to relate foreign language study to the economic and security needs of the United States;

3. To explore the question of how to encourage the hiring of people with foreign language skills; and

4. To investigate how to reward, in practical ways, the development of language skills among the American people, e.g., granting points on a Civil Service examination to persons with second language skills.[9]

We at the college and university level have no set expectations of students that enter our programs. Many of our new students place in intermediate-level language classes by virtue of what they learned in high school. Many students are exempted from lower-level proficiency courses by dint of their knowledge gained in high school. Conversely, many students place at the beginning level--either willfully, looking for "an easy grade", or because they did not adequately learn the material taught in the different levels in high school.

What we especially like to see is students who realize the value of what they are doing and understand why they are doing it, in spite of the fact that they are enrolled in required courses. Their enthusiasm and interest can be contagious and then become an asset for us.

All right, coaches. There is our strategy. It is up to you to develop and implement the game plan. Let us give our students a performance-oriented, meaningful experience in our classes. Positive learning experiences are the answer.

--Robert M. Terry, University of Richmond

THE ROAD TO PARADISE?

Please rest assured from the outset, I have no special insight into any particular roads that lead to paradise. The paradise I speak of is quite different. I speak of the possibility of harmony and peace and understanding amongst men and women here on earth. It is my belief that languages -- all languages, English included -- as well as an appreciation of foreign cultures can make a special contribution in this regard.

A sentence I read about six months ago in an American magazine is still dancing in my head. Here is the sentence: "Hell is a place where the cook is an Englishman; the car mechanic, an Arab; the policeman, Chinese; the husband, Russian; the lover, an American." But this observation is so negative, why look at culture and people from the negative point of view? It takes so very little to turn the whole thing around so that the negative becomes positive. For example, why speak of hell? Why not speak of paradise? "Paradise is a place where the cook is a Frenchman; the mechanic, a German; the policeman, an Englishman; the

8. Rebecca M. Valette and Renee S. Disick, MODERN LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES AND INDIVIDUALIZATION, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972, p. 85.
9. Letter from C. Edward Scebold, Executive Director, ACTFL, 17 October 1977.